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ABSTRACT

If educational success and failure are social accomplishments, then they are communicatively constituted; to this end, communication education scholars must begin to add their voices to a conversation started long ago in education. A study explored the likelihood of educational failure as a social construction. This paper does not neglect the various factors that appear to make some students more likely to fail than others. The paper suggests two things: first, the risk of failure does not manifest like a zero-sum game--there are a multiplicity of circumstances that may exist in any person's life that may make him/her more or less likely to fail in education; and second, any aspect of a person's identity is only a predictor of the likelihood of educational failure (or success) since it exists in relation to a given classroom ideology. It explains that in an analysis of focus group interviews with both undergraduate students and graduate teaching assistants (about 32 students) at a mid-sized midwestern university, an ethnomethodological approach was used to demonstrate that what researchers teach as a stable, objective aspect of reality--i.e., the inevitability of educational failure--is, in fact, a human accomplishment, the result of concerted social action. The paper concludes that the study's participants did not understand educational success or failure as simply staying in school or dropping out--instead, they resisted establishing definitions at all, by balking at interview questions and repeatedly returning to issues or perspectives. It also finds that other participants articulated a notion of educational success and failure as "phase-like." Contains 4 notes and 27 references. (NKA)

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Running Head: Being at risk

On doing being at risk: The role of educational ritual in constructions of success and failure

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On doing being at risk: The role of educational ritual in constructions of success and failure

Late on a Wednesday night, in one of the graduate teaching assistant focus groups, Laura says, "I was told coming in from a different adviser I had at my other school that this is what's going to happen to you: They are not going to care that you have a family. Your family is now second. You get used to that now, so that when you get there [you'll be ready];I didn't know where I was going [for the Ph.D.] at the time. Now, I haven't experienced that completely here, but it creeps out. It creeps out that you are not allowed to go through crisis, I mean, tough shit, move on." I look up from my notes to see the entire group, all graduate teaching assistants, nodding and muttering brief whispers of support. John adds, "Yeah, it's kind of like save the crisis for the holidays." to which Laura replies, "I don't know about you, but I can't do that." I think about this for a moment, and I recall preparing for my preliminary exams (i.e., the exams which determine whether a mere doctoral student may become a doctoral candidate, someone who is ready to write a dissertation); I attended class, taught classes of my own, read and wrote papers and managed to maintain all of my scholarly obligations—all with a raging fever from strep throat and an ear infection (which went on to become two ear infections, a burst ear drum, eye infections, temporary hearing loss, and financial crisis from payments to an ear, nose and throat specialist). Fortunately, spring break wasn't far away, so I could have a luxurious week to recover (and to write a paper for the regional conference). I look up to see all of the participants nodding, sympathizing. I sympathize as well; as I rub the permanently swollen glands in my neck, I begin to question whether researchers understand educational risk at all.

As a student, I feel as though I understand something about educational risk. I can remember little details from my educational past: like when I failed an exam because I spent the night before the test in the UC San Diego burn unit with my best friend who had fallen into a bonfire, or when one of my teachers in college told me he thought I should drop out because I was incapable of anticipating the next step in his Socratic teaching style and, thus, incapable of critical thought. At any of these times, I either risked my sense of self to stay in the academy, or my career in the academy to preserve my sense of self. And still, this says nothing about all the days I went to school sick or

hungry or worried; nor does it say anything about all the days I made decisions about my relative worth as a human being on the basis of a grade. Yet I stayed in school and, if we decide not to debate intellectual pedigree or theoretical orientation, I am, in a conventional sense, an educational success.

This study, therefore, begins from this complicated position: while I am an academic success, I attempt to explore the likelihood of educational failure as a social construction. Yet, if I have had family, time, money, health and, for the most part, hegemony (i.e., racial/ethnic, economic, heterosexist, and ageist) on my side, can I really know anything about the likelihood of educational failure? Yes, if I deviate from the more commonplace understandings of educational risk as the presence or absence of individual traits (such as non-White ethnicity or lower socioeconomic status). In this paper, I do not wish to neglect the various factors that appear to make some students more likely to fail than others (e.g., that students may have profoundly different educational experiences as a result of inequitable federal, state or local funding, or that students of racial or ethnic minority groups still encounter racism in their educational and social lives). However, I do intend to suggest two things: First, the risk of failure does not manifest like a zero-sum game—there are a multiplicity of circumstances that may exist in any person's life that may make her/him more or less likely to fail in education. In this sense, risk, if we are to continue to use such a metaphor, ebbs and flows like a tide; each of us may be at risk, to greater or lesser degrees, of different things and at different times in our lives. Second, any aspect of one's identity is only a predictor of the likelihood of educational failure (or success) in as much as it exists in relation to a given classroom (or other institutional) ideology. In this sense, educational risk is a very complicated phenomenon—not static as some scholars would have us believe, but active and shifting.

By adopting an ethnomethodological approach to the analysis of focus-group interviews[1] with both undergraduate students and graduate teaching assistants at a mid-sized Midwestern university, I demonstrate that what researchers teach us is a stable, objective aspect of reality—i.e., the inevitability of educational failure—is, in fact, a human accomplishment, the result of concerted social action. If educational success and failure are social accomplishments, then they are communicatively constituted; to this

end, communication education scholars must begin to add their voices to a conversation started long-ago in education, voices that arise from a unique understanding of and commitment to human communication.

A brief history of the social construction of educational risk

Several educational scholars have attempted, through elaborate historical analyses, to articulate the ways in which some of our most foundational assumptions about educational phenomena are socially constructed. For example, Sleeter (1986) describes how "learning disability" emerged during the post-Sputnik American push to redefine educational expectations and standards. Sleeter demonstrates that the learning disability label, in this context, served to explain why those white students who were failing educationally in light of these shifting standards. Ultimately, Sleeter notes, this label was intended to help these students by protecting them from the stigma of failure. In another, more recent study, Smith (1999) uses a cultural cartography metaphor to provide contrast to and demonstrate the ways in which medical metaphors have shaped and constrained our conventional understandings of developmental disability. Yet another extensive analysis, Sherman Dorn's (1996) work, Creating the Dropout: An Institutional and Social History of School Failure, demonstrates how the value Americans place in a high school diploma is, in large measure, the result of economic conditions.[2]

Still other education scholars attempt to shift their focus from historical social construction to the mundane, discursive construction of educational phenomena. Although an education scholar, Lynda Stone attends to issues of particular import to communication scholars in her essay "Language of Failure"; she describes how everyday discursive practices influence the ways understandings of success and failure become normative. Her article traces the history of the dunce, the classroom failure, in order to illustrate her concerns about the ways in which discourse comes to shape understandings of success and failure. Influenced by her reading of Foucault, Stone suggests developing a field of "failurism"—in short, an archeological, in the Foucauldian sense, study of how, historically, discursive practices have worked to connect classroom failure with personal shame (p. 18). As an example, she demonstrates how the meaning of the dunce has changed over time, form its original connection sot English philosopher and theologian

Thomas Duns to the Dickensian sense of the dunce as a "blockhead, incapable of learning" (p. 16). Sensing such patterns leads Stone to pose the question: "To name or not to name? From what kind of ethic may a caring and committed educator work?" (p. 23). And, though it remains implicit in Stone's essay, there is a third question: Because we are always already enmeshed in discourse, can we choose not to name?

As Stone suggests, language is complex, enigmatic, and often taken for granted. That what we have come to understand as the problem of educational failure remains with us, despite our best efforts, is testimony to its discursive slipperiness. There is no universally agreed-upon understanding of "success" or "failure"; such understandings will shift from person to person and from context to context. For example, in his interviews with 100 "dropback" students (i.e., students who left school but later returned for their graduate equivalency diploma), Altenbaugh (1998) found that a student's success in school is determined by whether she or he has experienced caring relationships with teachers. In another study, Peters, Klein & Shadwick (1998) found that student success involves more than simply remaining in school; a student's success depends upon image-management and self-determination. Peters, Klein and Shadwick, concerned that students' success may falter as they come to consider themselves as a problem to be solved, interviewed forty special education students. They conclude that the "problem" does not reside in the students, but rather within the discursive practices that help create school culture, expectations and opportunities to learn. In exploring learning disability as a social construction, Peters, Klein & Shadwick reconceptualize students with learning disabilities not as problems or victims, but as streetwise philosophers, image-makers and jazz-improvisationalists. This shift, they note, highlights the ways in which student resilience is only partially academic; it is also a matter of self-concept and self-esteem. What is particularly unsettling is the relative silence of communication scholars in regards to the social construction of educational outcomes, especially given the plethora of research in communication education which hopes to help respond to the needs of at-risk students.[3]

An ethnomethodological perspective

Ethnomethodology emerged during the 1960s as a re-specification (a revision or new way of seeing) of sociology. This "alternative sociology" began with Garfinkel's critique of Parson's understanding of rule-governed behavior—a foundational and still widely-held perspective (Button, 1991, p. 7). Rather than accepting the pervasive belief that people simply act on the basis of some externally imposed rule, Garfinkel argued that people create and recreate the rules they use to move through the world (i.e., the reasons behind their actions) within and through their actions. This is to say that what appears to be a stable, objective aspect of reality is instead a human accomplishment, the result of concerted social action (Garfinkel, 1968, p. vii). Thus the aim of ethnomethodology, according to West and Fenstermaker (1995), is "to analyze situated conduct to understand how 'objective' properties of social life achieve their status as such" (p. 19).

Historically, ethnomethodologists from a variety of disciplines have explored normative institutional structures, traditional research methods, and aspects of personal identity, looking for the ways the participants in those structured processes organize themselves to appear as though they are obeying an order (either natural or imposed). West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender is not a simple matter of biology, but rather a complex, though routine, accomplishment through social interaction. West and Fenstermaker (1995), build upon this argument by applying it to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and other traits of "difference." The authors of both these articles take an ethnomethodological stance, focusing on the local, situated aspects of interaction in lieu of the "objective" markers of race (i.e., skin color), class (i.e., level of income), and gender (i.e., the presence of particular physiology). Their aim is a respecification of the normal or typical way of understanding human traits. The authors view each of these characteristics of difference as a mechanism for, or the site of, interactional processes more than as a role or a trait (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 21).

To suggest that aspects of identity "difference" are created in and through social interaction lends a new dimension to the study of at-risk students. At-riskness may be less a matter of predictive variables such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status, and more a matter of work done by students, educators and the concerned population to render those categories stable and predictive. This is to say that educational risk may be constituted in

interaction, a series of ritualized social actions that take on the appearance of normativity over time. In short, what we have come to understand as educational risk (i.e., the presence or absence of particular traits) elides a more complete understanding: we are all at risk at some time or another, with more or less severe consequences.

Educational motives

While everyone I interviewed for this study is a student, either pursuing undergraduate or graduate work, several key distinctions exist between the two groups. Many of these distinctions are demographic; on average, the teachers in this study have been in school longer, are biologically older, and have, what I venture to say is a distinct relationship with education as a result of spending more years in school than their undergraduate counterparts. The students and teachers in this study, with few exceptions, identify very different educational goals for themselves. When I asked students what they identified as their educational goals, they typically responded with specific, concrete or quantifiable goals. For example:

> My individual goal is to get my bachelor's and then go on and get a job for a while. Then maybe have them pay for my master's. And then, about ten years down the road, try to get my license in architecture (Gwen, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).[4]

> I pretty much learned everything I need to know for my field [music or writing], so I just want to get out of here with a degree (Chase, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I want to get on the Dean's list… My sister was always…the only one on the Dean's list. So I wanted to change that… I just want to be up there on the Dean's list so everybody can be proud… To tell my kids I was on the Dean's list, to motivate them to be on the Dean's list too (Beth, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

> I guess I just want to graduate with a high GPA (Justin, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

> …I just want to graduate and get a degree and become successful (Jada, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

In fact, most undergraduates noted the desire to graduate as their most pressing goal. Some undergraduates modified this goal with others—e.g., the desire to find

employment, the desire to make money, or the desire to graduate with high grades or other honors. And, while the majority of undergraduates simply stated graduation or earning a high salary as a goal, a few undergraduates shared the reasoning behind their goals—e.g., to support parents, to motivate their children, to help other people. These goals, however, exist in marked contrast to those expressed by the graduate teaching assistants I interviewed.

The overwhelming majority of graduate teaching assistants identified more nebulous, life-long goals. I think it would be fair to say that this is consistent with the needs and experiences of a group of people that have chosen to enroll themselves in schooling for long periods of their lives. In many cases, graduate teaching assistants expressed the belief that education can transform, can make them better people. For example:

> ...one of my goals in education...has been increasing my ability to understand the types of forces and things that effect my life and the lives of people around me... I feel like the more I learn, the more classes I'm in, the more knowledge I can accumulate. The more connections I see, the better that I am able to do that. But I'm also—more recently, since graduate school—...very interested in increasing my ability to communicate and critically engage these things, particularly things I see as constraints in my life and things that I think are kind of screwed up (Leo, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> My goal as a student is to keep learning more and more, as much as I can, to fill the base education that I've got. Sort of helps me to see how the world really works (Francis, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> For me, it's to have a sense of wonder and joy about something (Felix, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> ...I wanted to indulge myself in education (Betty, GTA group, 3 24/99).

> I do it because I love this world. I think that I am a better person in this world than I am in any other milieu I have ever been in. And I think because I am a better person here that I become a better person in the world. I think because this world enables me to be that person, I can help more people. I can make the world a better place than I would from other positions I could take (Wendy, GTA group, 3/24/99).

This is not to suggest that only graduate teaching assistants have, perhaps, more altruistic motives than undergraduates, and that undergraduates have only practical, credentialing

motives at heart. Certainly there are exceptions to the distinction I make above. For example, Nastasja, a more experienced undergraduate by virtue of her experience with ten completed semesters of coursework at different schools, describes her goal in the following way: "I'm just trying to learn as much stuff as I can. That's me. I mean I take stuff that I don't even need for my degree, and I just take it just because, I mean, if it was up to me, I'd probably be like the perpetual college student, not just because like I was lazy, but because there's always something else I want to do" (undergraduate group, 3/10/99). And there are certainly graduate teaching assistants who are following a path clearly defined by others; for example, John, who is working toward his master's degree, explains his goals in this way: "My father has his master's. My mother is working on her master's. My grandfather has his master's. My uncle has his Ph.D. Several masters' in my family. I kind of felt like I really have to do it or be the black sheep of the family" (GTA group, 3/24/99). But, for the most part, the graduate teaching assistants I interviewed appeared to be motivated by something more than credentialing or convention.

In some aspects, the interview participants shared both educational difficulties and educational support. One of the most significant difficulties or impediments to their educational goals for all participants was a lack of money or financial security. Another shared difficulty involved the intrusion of family or personal crises (i.e., death in the family, getting sick in the middle of a semester, difficulties with roommates or partners, homesickness). Moreover, both groups described these crises as difficulties both for the disruption and pain that result from such events, but also for the ways in which these events have caused them to be disadvantaged by teachers they perceive to be uncaring or unsympathetic. For example:

> If you have a personal crisis, tough shit, move on. Compartmentalize it and move on (Laura, GTA group, 3/24/99).
>
> It is kind of like save the crisis for the holidays (John, GTA group, 3/24/99).
>
> [When] my grandfather died, I had to go Germany, you know? I was gone for two weeks. And a couple of my teachers understood and let me make up the work, and a lot of my teachers were like, well, you knew it was due and, you know, but I didn't have time. So I didn't get any sympathy from a couple of my

teachers. (Chris, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

> Some teachers don't even care if you broke your leg… Some people don't even care if you have a 110 fever. You barely tryin to get out of the bed. Paper due still, paper due. Ten points off, twenty points off (Jada, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

As the comments of these participants suggest, deaths in the family or personal health crises are not always met by teachers with understanding and sympathy. It is interesting to note, however, that many graduate teaching assistants not only expressed their frustration at how personal crises are treated by their teachers, they also indicated that such events often engendered personal frustration at their inability to, as Laura describes, compartmentalize the crisis, to put it aside and focus on the tasks at hand. For example,

> I have to be honest and say that I have internalized that expectation of myself, I was angry when something occurred in my life that I couldn't compartmentalize. I was like, why can't I do this? I should be able to do this. And when I couldn't, I was very disappointed in myself which only, of course, added to the whole shebang (Wendy, GTA group, 3/24/99).

Laura's and Wendy's comments do more than suggest an educational difficulty. Their comments also suggest something of the more painful constraints of pursuing an education. For instance, Wendy's disappointment in herself for not being able to set aside a matter that affects her deeply and personally may in fact be the logical extension of the caution Neil issues in an earlier group interview—i.e., what damage is done to a student's self-esteem when she or he interprets her identity almost exclusively as a student? While this is certainly a possible concern for any sort of student, it is only the graduate teaching assistants that foreground this difficulty, this struggle to background their personal interests and needs in light of their academic careers.

In their own way, undergraduates articulated what they perceived to be a difficulty in satisfying the demands of significant institutional figures, whether teachers, departments or schools. For example:

> I mean, you may be the best in what you do, but if the teachers don't like you, there's no way you're going to get through school (Gwen, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> If the teacher doesn't like your ideas, if he doesn't like you, then you're just bound to fail anyway… (Andi, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I had problems with my department when I transferred over here. I mean, it wouldn't transfer any of my credits, and, you know, cause I was from up in Chicago. I had a girlfriend who took the exact same classes at Ryan Lake College and they accepted her since she went to, you know, the department. Then I went to the academic dean, and then I went to the vice chancellor. I'm like, hello. [Knocks on the table]. This isn't fair. This is favoritism. When you see that people really don't care, that really kind of irks you… (Nastasja, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> …I went to Western Illinois and took all these core classes. I was going to be done with them. My PE course didn't even transfer down here. I had to take PE volleyball again. I had to take calculus, physics. All those classes I took my first semester to get them out of the way, I had to take them all over again (Paige, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I flunked out of school, and it took me five years to get back in. I almost didn't get back in here. So far, every semester, I have been on the dean's list here. You don't know how hard it is to try to get back into a school, let alone another school if you have a bad record because it's gonna follow you wherever you go. It is like—it is a major pain in the ass because you almost don't get a second chance… (Liam, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

Each of these undergraduates expresses a difficulty in meeting the established needs of an institutional gatekeeper. In Gwen and Andi's cases, they have had troubles with pleasing particular teachers; both suggest that if a student can't satisfy the teacher, then she or he may as well change majors or schools. In Nastasja and Paige's cases, their attempts to pursue coursework at other schools was thwarted by what they perceive to be unnecessary matriculation agreements. In Liam's case, the institutional half-life of poor academic performance is nearly long enough to preclude what appears to be a well-deserved second chance. However, most undergraduates did not express as keen an awareness of institutional stumbling blocks; for the most part, their difficulties were personal in nature.

While both undergraduates and graduate teaching assistants struggle to maintain a balance between the demands of their personal and academic lives, the two groups differ significantly in terms of what they consider to be a difficulty. For example, the undergraduates I interviewed often identified what may be perceived to be difficulties with the mundane. This is not, however, to suggest that these are not genuine difficulties,

but rather to suggest that the undergraduates I interviewed have, on the whole, greater difficulty with managing their day-to-day existence while in school. For example:

> Freedom is a big thing. You have been with your parents for so long under rules, and you come here, and it is parties, parties, parties, parties, parties (Penny, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

> Waking up on your own… Usually if you was livin in your mother's house, she would have woke you up. School start at eight o'clock. You getting up out the bed by seven. You get up here, your class starts at nine. You hear the alarm going off, but you don't feel like getting up. You're going to sit there. You got nobody to wake you up out the bed (Tysha, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

While undergraduates often identified difficulties that are consistent with recent home-leavers (i.e., struggling to set aside time to study, working with roommates and strangers to pay for the rent, or even to wake up in time for class each morning), graduate teaching assistants identified a series of difficulties that are more consistent with people who have what may be characterized as a love-hate relationship with their long-term educations. For example:

> Faith, lack of faith… [Lack of] personal faith in my ability to do the system and personal faith in that I can keep my integrity and do the system (Lucas, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> Patience—not having enough of it. Wanting to get it and get it now. I don't want to wait two years and say, oh, that's what that was all about, which is what's happening (Lazarus, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> Just stamina. You have been at something for so long and so hard and you start off just like a roller coaster or something like that, or you start off so tense and now it is going down, and it is just weary (Daphne, GTA group, 3/24/99).

These are the words of people who are attempting to, in a sense, make school their lives. Indeed, given the amount of time these graduate teaching assistants have spent in schools already, they are living lives where school figures prominently. So, they identify their attitudes toward that process as a potential and past difficulty—i.e., keeping the faith, cultivating their patience, maintaining their energy.

Graduate teaching assistants, unlike their undergraduate counterparts, also identify specific weaknesses as students as difficulties that interfere with their ability to achieve their educational goals. For example:

> Prior education. It has been a roadblock because I don't feel my reading skill is probably what most other graduate students, where theirs is at, and how do you relearn all that after the education I got in a small city school? How do I make up for that lost time? I feel I have to work harder than anyone else does to achieve half as much (Francis, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> Well, I had a really hard time learning how to study in college… I had to teach myself how to read and write and study over. The mechanics were all there, but really being able to get it took me four years of undergrad and two years of a master's program. And once I started teaching, I really learned how to learn a lot better (Felix, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> …Writing has always been a big issue for me… I don't know if I ever really got very good help on how to write… You just had to figure it out on your own, which took me a long time (Leo, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> Time is a big problem for me. Not time management, not juggling between family and school, but the way courses are structured… I like to argue a lot, these are things that are important for me to explore… The teacher says cut. And I say, that's just when I am warming up… The way the university—the way the courses are structured, you don't really have enough time to explore really, really important things (Frank, GTA group, 3/10/99).

It is as though, because the graduate teaching assistants have achieved a certain mastery of the mundane matters of daily life—e.g., paying bills or finding time to study, they are open to exploring the ways in which they might improve as students. Perhaps, however, it is more a matter of how a participant's own educational goals help to construct what she or he perceives to be difficulties. If an undergraduate's chief goal is to earn a diploma and find a job, then she or he will be very frustrated by institutional guidelines that govern the transferability and worth of courses taken at other institutions such as community colleges. If a graduate teaching assistant's chief goal is to endlessly accumulate knowledge, then she or he may be more frustrated by her or his own reading or writing skills.

One might hypothesize that these differences in experience and worldview would have profound consequences for classroom interaction: Would teachers find students who fail to espouse similar views to their own make it difficult for those students to achieve their own goals? Despite their apparent and seemingly obvious differences, the undergraduates and graduate teaching assistants I interviewed for this study hold several interests and concerns in common.

"Whose perspective?": Slippery definitions of success, non-success and studenting

> I think it is a different definition for everybody…one person's idea of success is different than someone else's (Dean, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

A recurring theme for both graduate teaching assistants and undergraduates in this study involved the difficulty of establishing set definitions for success or non-success. Rather than demonstrating that success and non-success are clear-cut absolutes, proverbially black and white in certainty, the participants in this study articulate understandings of educational goals and expectations that are simultaneously personal and provisional, systemic and absolute. Of particular concern to participants was the perspective from which they should attempt to answer the interview questions. While, as interviewer/moderator, I attempted to underscore that I was interested in how each group, or each interviewee, defined the successful (or unsuccessful) student, participants struggled with a the ways a variety of different forces may affect the meaning and/or truthfulness of their definitions. For example, in the following three excerpts, Neil, Daphne and Joe, all graduate teaching assistants, point to the conditional nature of success and failure, to the way in which it is an assessment made in accordance with a particular perspective or interest in education.

> Who's determining what's success? (Neil, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> And I think in order for us to define what is a successful or unsuccessful student, it depends on what your definition of success is. How do you measure success? Is it measured by completing the course? Is it measured by completing the university? Is it measured by your ultimate fulfillment as an individual? And then that is something we can't really get at because each individual has his or her own level of what constitutes personal fulfillment or personal success (Daphne, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> So Deanna, in sorting all of this out, has got the problem, I think, in her research, of figuring out whose perspective?… If we want to change the question and say what success is from our personal perspective as teachers, I think we would come up with a much different answer than as civilians, as part of the community at large (Joe, GTA group, 3/24/99).

In a sense, this further discussion of and concern for perspective may be a reaction to the seeming simplicity of the interview protocol questions. For example, across each of the focus group interviews, but especially in the graduate teaching assistant interviews,

participants commonly troubled or de-stabilized their co-participants' and their own responses. This is true of participants concern for the parameters of the definitional questions.

At the level of definition, participants articulated a concern for the ways in which, in their respective interviews, they sometimes or mistakenly or unreflectively conflate "good student" with "successful student" or "successful or good student" with "successful or good person." Sometimes participants embedded this concern within their comments, such as when Nastasja corrects herself to use "student" instead of "person" when she says, "To me, the unsuccessful person, or student I should say, is just the student who doesn't give a damn" (undergraduate group, 3/31/99). But, more commonly, participants addressed their definitional concerns more explicitly. In the following examples, Neil and Paige are concerned with drawing a distinction between the successful student and the successful person. Neil specifically reminds his group to be careful not to conflate the two terms because the consequences for students' identity may be severe.

> You want to draw a distinction between the successful person and a successful student. If the person, a student is really student-identified, you know, they are kind of narrowly—they're assessing their own success…just in terms of their student identity. I mean, that's kind of a narrow—for some people, that's a pretty narrow range to evaluate yourself. So I mean, you might be a successful person relationally, and in all these other ways, but you're still not getting the grades (Neil, GTA group, 3/10/99).

In this next excerpt, Taylor, Gwen and Paige are discussing what a student must do to be unsuccessful. Earlier in the interview, Gwen has argued that an unsuccessful student is someone who "has their priorities wrong." She specifically mentions going to parties as a misplaced priority.

> Taylor: If they [a particular student] came down here to be social and to be the most popular person on campus, and they achieve that goal, then they're being successful in what they came to do. Is that the right thing to come down here and do?
> Gwen: It is your view.
> Deanna: Does that make them a successful student?
> Paige: In the sense that they are talking about, it makes them a successful person, but it really doesn't seem like a good student (undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

In both excerpts, the participants struggle with whether individuals are able to self-assess their academic success. Neil's comments, in particular, also point to the ways in which one must consider her/his own assessment; without such an internal measure, a student risks neglecting other, equally important facets of her/his experience (e.g., being a parent or child or friend, preserving one's sanity in the face of academic pressures, and so on.). This is a subject which appears in many forms throughout the interviews; both undergraduates and graduate teaching assistants often find their role as student eclipsing what they perceive to be more healthy, or perhaps more complete, and equally significant social roles.

I also encountered slippage between the terms "good" and "successful" or "bad" and "unsuccessful," as participants applied them to students. For the most part, this slippage appeared to be an unreflective transposition of terms. However, some participants, as in the following example, pointed to and made meaning of the distinction in conversation. For example, Wendy notes that, for her,

> ...a student who doesn't turn things in or who doesn't come to class a lot or who doesn't come to do their speeches—I'll go out and say that's probably not the most successful student in my class. It doesn't mean that they are not a good student, it just means they are not succeeding at that point in time (GTA group, 3/24/99).

In the above excerpt, Wendy calls attention to what she perceives to be the phase-like nature of academic success. Much like Neil, Wendy resists a narrow definition of success, choosing instead to explore the ways in which people typically slide in and around seemingly discrete categories. John, another graduate teaching assistant, expresses a different perspective, but one that is nonetheless similar in its attention to the potential division and re-vision of what, at first blush, appear to be simple categories:

> One can be a successful student and a good student to me, but you don't always have to be both. I have a student in my class who uses every loophole. She is very successful. She is doing well in my class, but I can't say that she is an incredibly good person to teach (GTA group, 3/24/99).

For John, the successful student is someone who is able to accomplish various assigned tasks; even if she or he must resort to loopholes and technicalities. While John's successful student is competent, she is not really a pleasure to teach. Instead of a phase-

like sense of educational success, John seems to advocate a definition of success as meeting some minimum standards of compliance.

Participants also questioned the boundaries of roles such as student and teacher. Both undergraduates and graduate teaching assistants acknowledged teachers who were not formally of that vocation, as ell as the on-going and all-encompassing nature of learning. For example, Frank describes his family as a significant influence on his understandings of success in the following way:

> I personally also have certain role models in family situation—uh—family members who are not formal, they are teachers, but not formal teachers, but teach me how to do that and how to do that (GTA group, 3/10/99).

While Frank expands the notion of a teacher, in the following excerpt, Chase, one of the undergraduate focus group participants, clearly articulates the notion that a student, or the role of a student, may take many forms and occur in many different spaces. This excerpt is a continuation of the above excerpt where Taylor, Gwen and Chase are still debating whether a student's self-assessment of her/his relative academic success is meaningful.

Taylor: I don't know. I'm thinking, ok, well, this successful student, ok, maybe we can't characterize them as unsuccessful, and we think that they're total losers, but when graduation time comes, and it is time for us to be shifting out into our own jobs and to do our own thing, what the school actually characterizes as a successful student is really all that matters. So it really doesn't matter what they thought was successful, if they thought they should come down here to, you know, be the spotlight, if they thought that was the successful thing to do. And when time to graduate comes they have a 0.0097, but they're in every club on campus, do you think they're going to get hired? I mean, do you really think—

Chase: You also have to think about it like this. They could also get favored from their friends. Plus, like I said, my dad didn't do good in school at all. People who got straight A's, they are working less than my dad is. It's kind of like because he actually wanted to do something. The things he learned from school weren't in the classroom.

Taylor: I understand that to a degree, but if you come down here, and say you're in aviation and you have like a 1.002, do you think American Airlines—I don't care if your dad is the head pilot—if you have not learned anything while you've been in aviation, do you think they're doing to put you as a pilot with other people's lives at risk? I don't think so.

Chase: Ok, but the question is: Do you have to be in school to be a student? Not necessarily. The whole point of being a student is to learn something. It doesn't matter if you learn it in the classroom or not.

Gwen: But she said coming down here as a student.

Chase: If you come down here, you're a student (undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

Chase expands the notion of studenting in two different ways. First, he argues that students are, in effect, learners—an activity that can happen anywhere, in and out of the classroom. Second, he argues that a student learns more than academic subject matter in school; the student learns to establish social relationships as well, relationships that may well matter more than what may be learned, formally, in the classroom.

The above excerpt is illustrative of many of the participants' emergent themes. First, the participants were somewhat at odds on just how to define the (un)successful student. Taylor and Chase clearly articulate individualistic understandings of success. Taylor does this when she argues that a student has succeeded in her/his individual goal to be social in school, even if that success means missing class and assignments; Chase does this when he argues that "everyone kind of has to judge themselves." It is interesting to not, and very much characteristic of nearly all the interviews, that Taylor advocates a different understanding of success at the end of the excerpt: "...when graduation time comes...what the school actually characterizes as a successful student is really all that matters." This latter perspective is suggestive of a more system-oriented assessment of academic success; here one's individual assessment is held in tension with or, as Taylor's words suggest, overcome by others' (i.e., the school, the job market, American Airlines) assessments.

In many ways, Dean's observation in the epigraph to this section is truthful to participants' opinions regarding success and non-success—"one person's idea of success is different from someone else's." However, it is important to note that interview participants' thinking regarding definitions of educational success (or the lack thereof) coalesced along two identifiable and distinct understandings: (1) success is determined by an individual, internal assessment of whether one has achieved personal fulfillment, or (2) success is determined by an external, imposed assessment of whether one has achieved someone else's standards—perhaps those of a teacher, a school, a segment of the job market, or, more nebulously, "the real world." It would also be fair to say that participants alternatively accepted and rejected these views—opting for one or the other, holding both simultaneously, and, in frustration, leaving some questions unanswered.

Personal definitions of success

One of the ways the participants in this study conceptualized success was to describe it as a matter or internal, personal and private assessment. In this way, a successful student is successful if she or he believes her or himself to be so, according to her or his unique criteria (i.e., a sense of personal fulfillment, variously attained). Participants describe this in a variety of ways:

Who's determining what's success? I mean, they can get good grades. They can have the admiration of their teachers. They can have all of that and does it still mean much to them? (Neil, GTA group, 3/10/99).

I have a problem with some of the definitions of being successful because a student's goal may not necessarily be to get a degree… I think it's an individual goal-oriented thing (Lazarus, GTA group, 3/24/99).

Sometimes, to me, the good student and the successful student…and I agree with all that you've said…but the good student knows her or his own limits in terms of—they know what they can put into my class. They have a good sense of "Ok, I've got chemistry. I've got this horrible history thing and I hate history, but I've got to like pass this." They know what they're here for, and they know how to value the classes. So, I have a student who is getting like a C in my class, or even a D, but has, like, survived the semester and really succeeded in the classes she or he wanted to do well in. And sometimes I think all of us need to make that choice. What is going to be the priority along this line? And for some, that's just paying the bills (Lucas, GTA group, 3/24/99).

It is like to me individual. If you go to class, you know, maybe like once or twice a week, get the basic idea, and then study on your own and cut class, you pull off like B's. I mean, maybe you can do average without even working very hard. That might be your success, you know (Andi, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

I think success is pretty much what you consider to be happy (Chase, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

[Being a successful student means] walking away and actually learning something. I have had classes where I pulled off an A, and I don't know jack by the time I leave…I haven't learned anything, and to me, what good does having a degree or a diploma in hand if, by the time you get out in the real world, you are completely lost? (Nastasja, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

I think it's like different for everybody, like they—one might define success differently as being content, or more the outside goals or something (Yessica, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

This understanding of academic success is characterized by personal measurement—that is, whether a person is satisfied with how she or he is achieving particular educational goals. Although this perspective was held by both graduate teaching assistants and undergraduates, the latter tended to express this perspective more frequently. However, while graduate teaching assistants often addressed a desire for various degrees of compliance with institutional structures (e.g., submitting assignments, attending classes, adhering to grading and degree progress standards), they typically expressed their desire for this with equal concern for students' abilities to understand and critically read the history and motives behind such practices.

External definitions of success

Participants also characterized educational success in a second, more external manner. From this perspective, success is measured by achievement in light of other pre-established criteria—e.g., progress toward a degree, high marks in a class, satisfying a given teacher or teachers, finding employment upon graduation, and so on. The following examples demonstrate the ways in which other forces, external to the individual, serve as indicators or measures of success.

> It is going to be very hard for me to consider a student successful if the person fails the course. We have personal goals, and you are going to find yourself to be very ridiculous if you fail a couple of courses and got F's and say "I was a successful student" because society has a measure of success and the teacher also wants to cite you as an example of a successful student. You can be a diligent student and an enthusiastic student, but you did not make the grade (Frank, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> I share with Felix the understanding or the location of the success in being able to meet sort of outside criteria on the part of the students. I guess I would also want [to add]...being able to adapt to different situations in the classroom or with homework...because I think some classes or types of programs require you to be able to connect interpersonally with classmates and with the teacher, whereas others, other classrooms, expect you not to do that as much. And, being able to know how to do what in each situation is something that is hard to learn sometimes (Leo, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> I derive the word success from what I know from the system. I said what's successful, well, doing well, and where do I trace that back to? Well, I trace that back to society and what's successful in society (John, GTA group, 3/24/99).

My major is a technical major; so, if I'm not successful in school, there is no way I would be successful in the field because architecture takes the skills you learn in class. I mean, you may expand on those skills, but you need to be successful in the class itself (Andi, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

I think it's really a matter of having that piece of paper saying you've done this and you've done that (Taylor, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

...the way the grading system is set up, it, it is pretty much just doing what you're asked to do (Chase, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

This understanding of educational success is, therefore, characterized by external assessment from any number of interested and disinterested others. Participants frequently invoke "society" in their observations, as is the case with Frank and John above, as a standard for determining one's relative success. However, in order to learn about more specific influences (e.g., the relative importance of friends or family to one's understanding of academic success), I needed to ask frequent follow-up questions (a challenge in the focus group interview, where too much focus on one person's response risks boredom—and sometimes apprehension—in other participants).

This is not to suggest that participants do not combine the two perspectives, either by holding them in tension, or by advocating different perspectives at different times in the interview. For example, when Dean states "you need to pass. You need to get that degree. You need to learn what you need to learn, but you need to learn how to apply it to what you want to do," he is combining both views (undergraduate group, 4/7/99). He suggests that, while there are certain external criteria a student needs to satisfy (i.e., "pass," "get a degree"), the student must also pursue a personally desirable end (i.e., "what you want to do"). Similarly, when Joe states that "a student who graduates from college in a reasonable amount of time in a major they have some interest in and gets out of here is a success," he is demonstrating a mix of external and internal, or personal, criteria (GTA group, 3/24/99). Most participants, however, seemed to struggle with reconciling the two perspectives.

It is also important to note that this systemic construction of educational success is also characterized by an air of compliance—the willingness to get "that piece of paper," to "make the grade," to "adapt to different situations," or do "what you're asked to do." The participants' general satisfaction with accomplishing pre-established goals

stands in marked relationship to their expressed concern for authenticity, for students and teachers to genuinely care about each other, the subject matter, and the method of instruction.

Conclusion

The participants in this study did not understand educational success or failure as simply staying in or dropping out of school. Instead, they resisted establishing definitions at all, by balking at the interview questions and repeatedly returning to issues of perspective. Still other participants articulated a notion of educational success and failure as phase-like; Wendy, one of the graduate teaching assistants, does this when she notes that one of her students is just not succeeding at a given point in time (GTA group, 3/24/99). While far from generalizable, these findings are enough for me to feel troubled when I read or hear a researcher (including myself) relying upon pre-established criteria to determine a student's likelihood of educational failure. This is not to deny that certain statistical tendencies tend to hold true, but rather to say that, when researchers talk about educational risk, they are not discussing inevitable facts or natural givens, but rather the residue of individual attitudes and assumptions regarding the value and purpose of an education.

In other words, if educational success and failure are phase-like, in that they may be co-present in any student at any time, then educational risk is phase-like as well. Unfortunately, researchers and institutions, such as universities, tend to categorize students en masse as "at risk" or not. To do so is problematic in that, when researchers and institutions define risk as an identifiable attribute (as opposed to risk defined as in flux), they fail to consider how every single student is potentially at risk: of failure, of not learning, of not integrating fully into the social atmosphere of the classroom or campus, of sacrificing friends, family and culture in pursuit of a degree...

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[1] This paper reports focus group data from a larger study (comprised of both focus group and individual, in-depth, interview data). For this study, I recruited and engaged two groups of undergraduates who were enrolled in the introductory communication studies course, as well was two groups of graduate teaching assistants who were teachers in the introductory communication studies course. The average size of the groups was eight participants. I asked participants a series of eight questions, including, for example: How would you describe a successful student? How would you describe an unsuccessful student? What are your educational goals? What sorts of support have you received in achieving your educational goals?

Focus groups are a particularly useful method for culling stories regarding participant experiences, beliefs and values. In addition to eliciting information in response to the interview protocol, the focus group interview also affords researchers an opportunity to observe communication behaviors in process (e.g., the ways given groups function, the ways people employ language to facilitate sense-making, and so on). Focus groups have been widely used in a variety of academic disciplines, including sociology (Jarrett, 1993 & 1994; Morgan, 1992), education (Flores & Alonso, 1995), health (Plaut et al., 1993), and communication studies (Albrecht et al., 1993; Johnson et al., 1995; McLaurin, 1995; Proctor et al, 1994).

[2] Dorn's (1996, 1993) work shows that, prior to World War II, few educators were terribly concerned with high school dropouts. Indeed, the term "dropout" did not emerge with any consistency until the 1960s (Dorn, 1993, p. 354). Dorn demonstrates that economic conditions, specifically widespread concern for (a) large numbers of child laborers and, (b) that automation would replace many unskilled laborers, helped to incite student enrollment, creating and reinforcing the value we place on a high school education. Dorn notes that this increased enrollment, in a sense, created a self-fulfilling prophecy; he writes, "A higher proportion of teenagers today graduate from high school than in the 1960s, and, partly because of that, we still expect the vast majority to acquire diplomas" (1993, p. 357). Given this, it may be worth asking: Are we focusing on "at-risk" students when we should be focusing on unjust economic conditions?

[3] While some communication scholars (i.e., Garard, 1995; Garard & Hunt, 1998; Johnson, 1994; O'Leary, 1999; Pounds, 1999; Warren, 1999) have attempted to explore more holistic understandings of educational risk, the overwhelming majority of published research in the field relies upon a medical or deficit model of educational failure. Recent studies published in Communication Education by Chesebro, et al. (1992), Rosenfeld and Richman (1999), and Rosenfeld, Richman and Bowen (1998), rely upon earlier studies, such as the National Center for Educational Statistics data, as a means to measure a student's risk of failure. As a result, these studies further reinscribe the prevailing normative assumption that educational risk is a matter of fulfilling demographic criteria.

[4] I invited participants to propose pseudonyms for themselves as a means of protecting their anonymity. This is in accordance with my agreement with Southern Illinois University's Human Subjects Committee. For each excerpted participant comment, I have indicated the participant's pseudonym and the date of the interview. Furthermore, where there is underscoring in participant excerpts, it is to call the reader's attention to specific details of that excerpt, not to indicate participants' own emphasis.